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Trotsky, Leon

By [Ian D. Thatcher](#)

Trotsky, *Leon*

Russian revolutionary communist

Born 26 October 1879 in Yanovka, Russian Empire

Died 21 August 1940 in Coyoacan, Mexico

Leon Trotsky's communist leadership was partially responsible for bringing about the October Revolution of 1917, after which Russia exited the First World War. Starting as an activist, he became People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs and People's Commissar for War in the first Soviet government. Trotsky's commitment to international revolution clashed with Joseph Stalin's theory of socialism for his country. He used his journalistic experiences on the front to inform his eventual leadership of the Red Army.

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Background

Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) arouses passion in admirers and critics in a life that is hotly contested. The First World War was an important and eventful period in his life. He was a revolutionary activist and journalist in Switzerland, France, Spain, and America, before returning to Russia after the fall of [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1868–1918\)](#). Well-known in European radical socialist circles, his writings appeared in left and liberal newspapers, chiefly *Nashe Slovo* (Our Word), *Kievskaya Mysl* (Kievan Thought), and *Novyi Mir* (New World). His fame spread considerably when he was minister of foreign affairs and war in the Soviet government following the [October Revolution of 1917](#).

Marxist interpretations of World War I

Trotsky interpreted the origins of the First World War in the framework of Marxist economic and class analysis. Hostilities, for him, were the consequence of the productive forces outgrowing national boundaries. In order for the productive forces to continue to grow and develop, the "relations of production" (i.e. government, ownership) would have to cross national boundaries. Under capitalism and imperialism this meant one group of capitalists trying to assert its international hegemony through the use of force. Any talk of the war as one of "national liberation" was therefore, on Trotsky's reading, nonsense. Armed conflict was the only answer capitalism could have to an underlying economic imperative. Trotsky, as ever full of revolutionary optimism, discerned some good news for left radicals in his analysis. If the nation-state was too narrow a base for economic development, it was also redundant as a revolutionary centre. For Trotsky, in Europe at least, a revolutionary strategy would have to be continent-wide. Revolution would have to occur across old national boundaries in Europe, becoming in its consummation a socialist United States of Europe.

The main task for Trotsky and his comrades was to propagate a correct Marxist analysis and response amongst the workers and socialist intellectuals. The main thrust of his journalism was therefore polemical, against the imperialist war and against any ideological confusion in socialist parties or amongst the workers. The chief target of his ire was so-called "social-patriotism": socialists who called a truce on domestic class struggle in order to help the homeland in its hour of need. There were also passionate debates with rival factions among Russian Social Democracy. Trotsky opposed [Vladimir Il'ich Lenin's](#) (1870–1924) strategy of turning the imperialist war into a [civil war](#) because it was rooted in the nation state. Lenin's thinking, for Trotsky, was also closely linked to defeatism. The defeat of one's nation was, according to Trotsky, the worst path to revolution; a defeated nation would be impoverished and exhausted, leaving it incapable of constructing a socialist society. Trotsky also rejected the Menshevik pacifist internationalists who thought that a slogan of peace could be used to rouse the masses against the war. Yes, peace was the aim, but it could be achieved only through a pan-European revolution. The means and the slogans therefore had to be about debunking international imperialism and organising a Europe-wide revolt by an active and conscious proletariat. The main division within socialist politics was between internationalists and nationalists. Trotsky fought for the unification of all internationalists, which he believed was the nature of the historical conjuncture.

In addition to propagating revolutionary socialism, Trotsky was interested in the social and psychological aspects of contemporary warfare. As a war correspondent for *Kievskaya Mysl*, Trotsky received official permission to visit the western front. He wrote quite movingly about life in the trenches and how this alienated soldiers from their usual domestic life. Once caught up in the communal experience of daily danger in the trenches, with its own slang and routines, soldiers found it difficult to reconnect with home life. They felt there were experiences and outlooks that could only be shared with comrades-in-arms. Trotsky wrote that the impact on hearth and home could therefore be injurious, as if sons, brothers, and husbands were lost even if they remained

alive.

Trotsky also noted the radicalizing effects of army life on soldiers. Peasants were taken from their isolated "backwardness" and thrust into a modern and modernizing environment. This produced a mental revolution that, for Trotsky, would one day be used in the cause of a pan-European revolution.

Trotsky's anti-war and socialist activities brought him into conflict with governments. His journalism was subject to censorship. He was exiled from Paris when there was suspicion that his revolutionary message spurred a revolt of Russian soldiers stationed in France. After a brief sojourn in Spain, during which he was closely watched, Trotsky managed to obtain passage to America. He thought his days in Europe were over. However, after two months of revolutionary speeches and journalism in New York, Trotsky returned to "free Russia" after the February Revolution of 1917.

The 1917 Russian Revolution

The fall of Tsar Nicholas II fundamentally altered the situation in Russian social democracy, whose factions had disputed how an anti-autocratic revolt would occur. With tsarism at an end, the key question was: "What next?" Power in Russia was dispersed amongst numerous local and national bodies, including the Russian [Provisional Government](#), the Petrograd Soviet, local soviets, local town councils, social organisations, and newly emerging national institutions in Finland, Ukraine, and elsewhere. In Trotsky's view, socialists had to rally behind the soviets and demand that all power be transferred to these workers' democratic bodies. To that end, all internationalists had to unite in a single party. Socialism had to be anti-war, pro-worker, and internationalist.

Trotsky found a ready ally in Lenin, with whom he quickly forged a positive working relationship. Both leaders shared a goal of effecting revolution; neither was held back by old factional loyalties. Their message and partnership was particularly effective in the face of the disintegration of Russian political, economic, and social life in 1917. With a movement overcoming setbacks in April and July, a growing support base undoubtedly enabled a successful overthrow of the Russian Provisional Government in October 1917, a revolution that occurred according to Trotsky's strategy.

The assumption of power by Trotsky and the Bolsheviks marked the first fundamental threat to the main players in the alliance system of the First World War. The Russian Provisional Government was adamant that Russia's Entente commitments had to be honored. As people's commissar for foreign affairs, Trotsky saw it as his role to destroy the old diplomatic and military order. He thus published the secret treaties to unmask imperialist diplomacy. He called for an immediate end to hostilities, if not voluntarily then through international revolution. In peace negotiations with the Central Powers Trotsky engaged in an unconventional strategy to further the European revolution when he refused to sign a treaty and declared a state of "no war, no peace."

The period of Trotsky's triumph also contained the seeds of his future disappointments. The national revolution did not spread beyond Russia's borders; [Joseph Stalin's \(1878-1953\)](#) leadership attempted to build socialism in isolation. It was a political environment that, after Lenin's death, saw Trotsky crushed politically and exiled from the USSR. Trotsky never abandoned revolutionary politics, continuing to write and organize and eventually forming a new Fourth International. He was forced to move country of residence frequently until finally finding refuge in Mexico. It was here that after several failed assassination attempts, one of Stalin's agents murdered Trotsky in his study.

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